

PG&E Alerted To Risk of Worn Hooks Back in 1987

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PG&E was alerted more than 30 years before the deadly Camp fire about the failure risk of worn steel hooks like the one that snapped and caused the most destructive wildfire in state history, documents obtained by NBC Bay Area's investigative unit show.

According to a February 1987 engineering evaluation, the company ordered the tests of two worn hooks that were found on a transmission line in Contra Costa county – hooks that look chillingly similar to ones taken from the nearly 100-year-old transmission line blamed for the fire that left 85 dead.

The company's Department of Engineering Research subjected the two hooks with "grooves worn in them" to tests given "a concern that they may not be able to hold the weight" of high voltage lines.

Engineers suspected the grooves were being worn into the steel hooks as a result of "swinging in the wind over a period of time."

The two grooved hooks, as well as a third hook with no visible wear, all failed at loads far lower than capacity. The PG&E report called for more testing of hooks in stock for its system, especially given that unworn hook failed at about one quarter of the load it was supposed to handle. That was actually worse than the two worn hooks, however, which failed at about one third of the specified capacity of 30,000 pounds.

However, the report did not specifically call for testing of worn hooks. It isn't clear whether the company did any further testing of grooved hooks like the ones found still in use on the Caribou-Palermo line in Butte County.

Robert Cagen, a former regulatory lawyer with the state Public Utilities Commission, called PG&E's apparent failure to act on the warning it got back in 1987 "a lost opportunity to save lives."

Cagen said under state regulations, a systemwide inspection was merited to assure safety. Had such inspections been conducted, he said, the effort would have averted the tragedy.

"PG&E was aware of a big problem and did nothing to solve that problem," Cagen concluded.

It was a problem that was still evident when PG&E crews, after the Camp fire, inspected the line where the hooks were taken to be evaluated in the 1987 report – the 115,000 volt Oleum G transmission circuit. Earlier this year, crews removed a critically worn hook from a tower on a hillside, near a petrochemical storage tank along Interstate 80 in Rodeo.

Ratepayer advocate Mark Toney, executive director of the group TURN, said in an interview that he was "absolutely flabbergasted" when he saw images from the 1987 report that were "just like the hooks that failed in the Camp fire transmission lines."

Toney concluded: "It looks like PG&E simply failed to do the job and that they knew there was a problem for 30 years."

PG&E issued a statement for this story that did not address the details of the 1987 evaluation and did not say what, if anything, was done to address questions related to the identified worn hooks.

The company's statement says its "most important responsibility is and must be the safety of our customers and the communities we serve."

Along with shutting down the Caribou-Palermo line, PG&E says it "completed an unprecedented process to inspect every element of our electric system within the high-threat fire areas" and made repairs to "ensure that our electrical equipment within the high fire-threat areas is suitable to serve our customers safely."